
International Conference “Black Studies in Europe”

A Transnational Dialogue with the US?, Université Libre de Bruxelles,
November 16-17, 2017

Olivia Fifi Gieskes



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/8677>

ISSN: 1765-2766

Publisher

AFEA

Electronic reference

Olivia Fifi Gieskes, « International Conference “Black Studies in Europe” », *Transatlantica* [Online],
1 | 2017, Online since 04 December 2018, connection on 29 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/8677>

This text was automatically generated on 29 May 2019.



Transatlantica – Revue d'études américaines est mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence
Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

International Conference “Black Studies in Europe”

A Transnational Dialogue with the US?, Université Libre de Bruxelles,
November 16-17, 2017

Olivia Fifi Gieskes

- 1 The first edition of the international conference *Black Studies in Europe: A Transnational Dialogue* aimed to question the many ways in which Black Studies developed as an academic field in European countries. Building on American scholarship and literature of black people and black experiences in the US, which have dominated academia and black activism since the 1960s, the participants took part in roundtables and discussed how to establish theories and epistemologies relevant to European contexts, according to distinct histories of black communities, academic traditions, cultures, and political climates in European countries. Participants made a strong appeal to expand transnational exchanges among European scholars and with American scholars. Organized under the leadership of Nicole Grégoire, the conference was supported by a consortium of Belgian universities, among which were: Université Libre de Bruxelles, Université Catholique de Louvain, and Catholic University of Leuven.

Keynote Address: Michelle Wright (Emory University, Northwestern University) “When and Where We Enter. Epiphenomenal Blackness for a 21st Century” in discussion with Paul Gilroy (King’s College) – Chaired by Olivia Fifi Gieskes

- 2 At present, most conferences on Black Studies take place in the US. Michelle Wright lamented that the privilege of US scholarship tends to overlook the situatedness of black people in Europe. This is mainly because of the centrality of Middle Passage epistemologies which distorts experiences of black people who do not have a history in the Transatlantic Slave trade. Moreover, Wright suggested, American Black Studies tend

to take heterosexual male narratives as vantage points to analyze conditions of black people, which renders positions of black women and queer individuals less visible. Wright argued that it is important to organize conferences on Black Studies in European countries, where black European scholars are at the forefront to contextualize epistemologies and definitions of blackness in European contexts. To interpellate blackness in the diasporic contexts of Europe more accurately, Wright put forward epiphenomenal timelines, challenging conceptual understanding of history as a linear progressive narrative. Instead of reducing black identities and collectives to the material conditions of slavery and racist oppression, epiphenomenal timelines encompass multidimensional time frames. Malleable and contingent on changes, such ever-shifting epiphenomenal timelines allow us to make sense of the plurality of blackness in Europe beyond slavery, colonialism, and discrimination, and for example focus on black presences in Ancient Europe. Such epiphenomenal timelines are particularly useful for black European contexts, given the myriad of identities, histories and different (in)visibilities in many European nations.

- 3 Paul Gilroy endorsed Wright's critiques on US parochialism in Black Studies. He differed, however, with the idea that heterosexual black male perspectives have dominated Black Studies in the US and obscured understanding of collective black experiences, in particular those of women and queer individuals. Gilroy insisted that the principal problem with the extrapolation of blackness from American to European contexts is that European scholars fail to interrogate and confront US intellectual, military, and economic power. Gilroy argued that it is important to acknowledge how US hegemony complicates power relations between black people. Black American experiences are encoded in US political power and capitalism, allowing black people in the US to enjoy political and economic privileges that diverge from black experiences in the rest of the world. In a more radical approach to expand diverse formations of blackness, Gilroy contended that US global political, economic, and military power should be challenged more thoroughly. Furthermore, Gilroy argued, European political climates, currently marked by upsurges of far-right and racist political movements, make it all the more important to cultivate movements expanding beyond racial configurations. Those movements should be based on ecologies of belonging and planetary humanism, and geared towards strengthening human relations and solidarity.

Roundtable I: "The emergence of Black Studies in European Countries" – Chaired by Sibö Kanobana (University of Ghent)

Marta Sofía López Rodríguez (University of León)

- 4 Marta Sofía López Rodríguez explained that Spain does not have a tradition of Black Studies. Most scholars that deal with black populations are based in African Studies, critical disciplines such as Gender Studies, and are Francophone/Anglophone as well as white. It is only recently that a small group of scholars has started to collaborate with artists and activists to examine Spain as a postcolonial space. López Rodríguez strongly advocated for Black Studies to be trans- and interdisciplinary to legitimize (black) epistemologies and heed black voices in Spain.

Kwame Nimako (Black Europe Summer School/ University of California Berkeley)

- 5 Kwame Nimako made a distinction between Black Studies in Europe and the study of black people in African Studies. Nimako explained that Black Studies should be understood as an emancipatory project for black communities that were historically situated as migrant groups but now must be analyzed through their European citizenships. Compared to the US, where American Black Studies emerged from slavery and racial segregation, Black Studies in Europe must confront European societies' claims to colorblindness, not to mention their collective amnesia toward their colonial past. Since race in Europe is often not acknowledged as an organizing principle, racism is not always recognized as a systemic problem but as an interpersonal issue. This presents problems for the development of Black Studies. Nimako defines six distinct features that are necessary to establish Black Studies scholarship(s) in Europe: (1) Reflections on race; (2) The recognition of the history of slavery; (3) Colonialism; (4) Humiliation; (5) Dignity; (6) Memory. More so, to study black European populations in a comprehensive way, Nimako advocated adopting interdisciplinary approaches including sociology, political sciences, and economics, to account for the social positionalities of black people as well as the political economic structures which they navigate.

Stephen Small (University of California Berkeley)

- 6 Stephen Small specified that black scholars face at least three obstacles in establishing Black Studies: (i) the proclivity of European universities to override the study of black people in favor of studies on Muslim communities. This transfix on Muslims, refugees, and migrants leads to a neglect of black communities who have a longer historical presence in European countries; (ii) European exceptionalism, i.e. the idea that Europe is racially tolerant compared to the US; and (iii) the notion that black people in Europe should be grateful to live in Europe, where racism is not as pervasive as in the US. There is an obligation for black scholars to counterbalance these obstacles, Small argued, so that black citizenship, rights and institutional racism in European societies can be addressed.

Jacqueline Andall (University of Tokyo)

- 7 Jacqueline Andall explained that the development of Black Studies in Italy is in an embryonic stage. Italy has struggled with the integration of black populations, at present especially related to the (black) refugee crisis. The development of Italian Black Studies is further problematic because Italians have a problem with their own ambivalent racial genealogy. Although European, Italians have, in comparison to northern Europeans, always been classified as non-whites and viewed as more closely related to Africans and blackness. This creates a situation where Italians have an inferiority complex, reject equality with black people, and yet cannot claim white superiority vis-à-vis their European peers. Finally, Black Studies in Italy develop in a context where Italy has sanitized its colonial past. However, Italian colonial archives are gradually being challenged by migrants from Italy's former colonies, e.g. Somali and Ethiopian, mostly

female artists who are opening spaces for discussions about race and colonialism through movies and art.

Sarah Fila Bakabadio (Cergy-Pontoise University)

- 8 Sarah Fila Bakabadio explained that in France, most scholars with tenured positions are white. The few African scholars that are trained at French universities are driven to return to their home countries after they graduate. This situation raises questions of positionality: who exactly speaks for black people in France? To complicate matters further, many groups of black French people, e.g. creoles or mixed-race black people, do not self-identity as blacks and often distance themselves from their black African lineage. These complexities make it urgent to deconstruct black identities in Black French Studies to understand what blackness, in all its different facets, mean to different people, historically and at present. Additionally, Bakabadio argued that a great difficulty in consolidating Black Studies in France is that they must build on dominant American scholarship and borrow from English concepts. Much of the terminology from the American English lexicon does not translate well into French vocabulary and French historical contexts.

Nicole Grégoire (Université Libre de Bruxelles)

- 9 Nicole Grégoire described how despite Belgium's colonial history in Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi, as well as the historical presence of black colonial migrants in the country, Black Studies have not developed within Belgian universities. The focus on migration in academic studies and integration policies in Belgium makes the Congolese population whose presences are not linked to migration regimes, invisible. Grégoire explained that a new generation of young black activists outside academia, most of them students, are now challenging academic and political configurations through postcolonial critiques and pushing for counternarratives to make black African communities more visible in public spaces. Black youth activism seems to offer the most promising avenue for the establishment of Belgian Black Studies.

Michael McEachrane (Raoul Wallenberg Institute for Human Rights)

- 10 In Sweden, interest for Black Studies arose in the 1990s as a result of the global popularity of Postcolonial Studies. The problem for the development of Black Studies in Sweden however, is that Sweden has constructed a national image as a benevolent antiracist country and human rights champion that, unlike the US and European nations, did not took part in slavery or colonialism. As such, the existence of race and racism is ignored, as well as how Sweden benefited from systematic racial oppression. McEachrane debunked such notions and explained that Sweden was deeply involved in Transatlantic slave trade and colonialism in Africa.
- 11 He further argued that even though Swedish people deny the existence of race, Swedish nationhood is quintessentially a racialized state, centered around notions of whiteness and white superiority.

Iolanda Evora (University of Lisboa)

- 12 Portugal was one of the first colonial empires in Africa. Nonetheless, the study of black people and black communities in Portugal has always been marginalized in Portuguese academia. Most black scholars who work or study at university do not come from Portugal, have no historic connections with the country, and often take less critical dispositions towards issues like racism or Portugal's colonial histories. The most critical forms of knowledge production are created by black activists outside academia, who use digital platforms and social media to enhance the visibility of black people and address controversial topics such as racism in public spaces.

Roundtable II: "Blackness in European Black studies" – Chaired by Heleen Debeuckelaere (Black Speaks Back)

Iolanda Evora (University of Lisboa)

- 13 Concerning the question how blackness is conceptualized, Evora explained that blackness does not exist as a conceptual category in Portuguese public spaces. Evora argued that the recognition of black presences in Portugal would force a reevaluation of how black people came to Portugal and lead to an acknowledgment of black people's (historical) economic contributions to Portuguese society. The fear is that this will disrupt the identity of Portuguese nationhood. Consequently, Black people in Portugal create their own multiple designations for blackness (such as *lusso-africanos*), in a terminology which emphasizes the sense of non-belonging. Some groups, such as first-generation Cape-Verdeans specifically do not self-identify as blacks and distance themselves from other black Africans. However, many second-generation black migrants, including Cape-Verdeans, are becoming more politicized and use digital platforms to articulate and embrace black identities. These young black activists explicitly politicize blackness to address issues such as racism and build alliances with other black people in Portugal.

Jacqueline Andall (University of Tokyo)

- 14 Blackness in Italy is compartmentalized into groups of black people who migrated from former colonies such as Somalia, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, and 'new blacks' from migrant countries such as Senegal and Cape-Verde. As a result, blackness takes on different meanings for each group. Eritreans resist collective groupings with other black populations because that can obscure their specificities, including long-standing historical relations with Italy. Additionally, blackness is gendered, stratified by economic positions, and varies from geographic locations in Italy.

Stephen Small (University of California Berkeley)

- 15 Stephen Small emphasized the need to use operational definitions of blackness that are multidimensional. He invoked the term political blackness, which triumphed in the 1970s in the UK and included Indians and Pakistanis. Political blackness proved powerful in

pushing for social transformations, allowing for concerted strategies across marginalized ethnic groups. This less fixed concept of blackness was successfully created and appropriated because rigid racial categorizations of blackness were, and still are, specific to the US, where racial oppression is more overt. Small suggested that today more than ever, compounded and pragmatic notions of blackness are necessary to build stronger alliances across marginalized groups, especially because the problems that black people are confronted with are greater than the resources available to them.

Sarah Fila Bakabadio (Cergy-Pontoise University)

- 16 In France, the English terminology 'blacks' is employed to define blackness instead of the French word *Noir*. On the one hand this appropriation of an American term results from the popularization of black American culture and imagery around the world. On the other hand, the use of American term for blackness is a way to dissociate the French language from a politically and racially charged word.

Kwame Nimako (Black Europe Summer School/ University of California Berkeley)

- 17 Nimako acknowledged that racial terminologies can vary depending on societal contexts. Nimako however cautioned that when scholars consider definition(s) of blackness, it is important to not approach it as a contested concept. Racial categories, including blackness, only become problematic if we classify them along hierarchical paradigms of racial superiority/inferiority. He argued that the association of blackness with the African continent must be made more positive and centralized as a reference point for the purpose of clarity. Furthermore, Nimako argued in favor of distinguishing between black populations, as well as identifying black associates and black allies to be more inclusive of those individuals who fight for the cause of black people in academia and beyond.

Michael McEachrane (Raoul Wallenberg Institute for Human Rights)

- 18 In response to their underrepresentation and the need for positive black representations in Swedish society, the term 'Afro-Swedes' is mostly employed by second-generation of migrants of African descent. As such, the designation refers to a form of self-empowerment and specifically rejects terminologies that have negative connotations, such as "negro" or "black". This is because most black Swedes who employ the term originate from East Africa, where ethnicity, nationality and religion, rather than race are the dominant identity formations. In addition, this designation of "Afro-Swede" is the result of how black Swedish people internalize Swedish ideas on race as an irrelevant category in a supposedly colorblind country.

**Keynote address: Kwame Nimako (Black Europe Summer School/ University of California Berkeley)
"Power, (Mis)representation, and Black European Studies," in discussion with Mireille Fanon-Mendès-France (President Fondation Frantz Fanon) – Chaired by Bambi Ceuppens (Royal Museum for Central Africa)**

Kwame Nimako (Black Europe Summer School/ University of California Berkeley)

- 19 Knowledge production and education are fundamental for any population. Black Studies are inextricably connected to an emancipation project from historical power constellations in the field of knowledge production. Since the 19th century, institutionalized knowledge production has been organized as Eurocentric and oriented to serve nationalistic purposes, effecting psychological damages on racialized and oppressed people (e.g. black people) and excluding them from European nationhood. However, as Nimako asserted somewhat counterintuitively, this enduring pattern of domination breeds resistance. It is in this context that Black Studies have emerged as a response to racial domination. The latter not only operates through economic and military systems, but especially through distorted knowledge production for Black Europeans. Nimako identifies five developments that suggest that the rise of Black Studies is inevitable: (1) the racial domination that operates at the level of (Western) nation-states and economies can no longer be controlled by states, because the globalized world economy now reduces the power of states; (2) the rise of black female academics; (3) the social mobility and ambitions of black people; (4) the revival of black self-identity and (5) the reinvocation of *Africana* intellectual traditions.

Mireille Fanon Mendès-France (President of Fondation Frantz Fanon)

- 20 Mireille Fanon Mendès-France addressed the urgency of Black Studies in a European context where black people are invisible, stigmatized, and oppressed. Black Studies is inevitable and necessary but does not fit the agenda of European politicians who want to maintain (international) power relations premised on white supremacy and anti-blackness. These ideologies dovetail Western capitalism, leading to recurring wars and exploitation patterns around the world, and especially in Africa. These forms of oppressions at present also take place via multilateral institutions and bilateral relations. Fanon Mendès-France urged that it is important to dismantle colonial remnants and contest racial structures in international institutions as well as in academic, economic, and political fields. However, Fanon Mendès-France cautioned critical voices: when challenging institutions, one should not be naive and on the contrary expect to be opposed not only by the political and economic *status quo*, but also by the media and academia.

Roundtable III: "Black Studies, Black Activism, and Politics" – Chaired by Omar Ba (Historian/Activist)

Antumi Toasijé (Pan African Studies Centre Parla)

- 21 Toasijé explained that black activism in Spain was set in motion after 1992, in the aftermath of killings of black people by the police. He named police brutality against black people as one of the major systemic racial problems in Spain. Racial profiling by law enforcement is rampant and racial bias is strongly embedded in the Spanish justice system where judges impose significantly higher sentences for black defendants while neglecting racist violence against black people. Since 2014, an increasing number of young black activists who were born in Spain have become engaged in activism and mobilized along Pan-African and Postcolonial ideologies. They fight to not only eradicate racism, police brutality, poor housing, labor discrimination, but also to obtain reparations and more political participation.

Stephen Small (University of California Berkeley)

- 22 Stephen Small asserted that relationships between academics and activists are critical to advance Black Studies in Europe. Small took the UK as an example of a nation where the organization of Black Studies is more advanced than in other European countries. This results from the UK's long tradition of anticolonial/slavery activism, not to mention the presence of black populations who were granted British citizenship during British colonial rule. However, Small cautioned that black academics or activists should not be viewed as monoliths but rather as stratified along political ideologies, different levels of access to resources, as well as distinct levels of critical thinking. Discussions about black people's lack of power or access to resources and institutions have not been sufficiently addressed, and more emphasis should be placed on how to mitigate these deficiencies. Against this background, Small argued that it is critical to focus on black actors but also create inclusive alliances with non-black individuals engaged in black activism and knowledge production. Finally, Small shone a spotlight on black women who have been on the forefront of black activism and academic movements. This is because black women have historically withstood the worst of oppressive ideologies and institutional practices (misogyny and racism) and are more likely to fight against them. Therefore, to accommodate black women's issues more properly, Gender Studies should have a prominent role within Black Studies, which currently is not sufficiently the case.

Véronique Clette (Université Libre de Bruxelles)

- 23 Clette has conducted research on the evolutions of black artistic and activist fields in Belgium. Black activism and Black Studies in Belgium have not developed in the same organic ways as in the US. In the American art world, black activists are integrated as principal actors in universities where their activism take place. In Belgium this is not the case, as black activists organize outside academia. This results from a two-fold issue: in Belgium, race is not considered as an analytical category in neither political nor academic agendas. First, in political agendas, the societal issues/problems of racialized populations

are eclipsed by sociological determinants such as class, labor, and education. Consequently, political policies focus on economic factors and migration issues, overlooking African colonial migrants whose presence is not premised on labor migration. Secondly, academia requires objectivity and neutrality, which pressures (black) scholars to alienate themselves from personal frames of references rooted in their black experience. Put differently, in addition to colorblindness, academia disavows lived (black) experiences that can serve to create new forms of situated epistemologies. At present, Afro-feminists, Congolese, and Belgian activists are on the forefront to create discussions driven primarily by postcolonial critiques and, to a lesser extent, analyses of Belgium as a racialized society.

Roundtable IV: "Towards a Common Conceptual Framework? – Chaired by Kehinde Andrews (Birmingham City University)

- 24 The first edition of the Black Studies in Europe conference provided a broad range of perspectives on the development of Black Studies across European nations. Building further on American scholarship, participants made it clear that it is important to not essentialize experiences of black populations in Europe with that of black people in the US. The trajectory of Black studies in the US, which started from black social movements in the 1960s, has resulted in a well-established academic field. However, Black American Studies tradition could flourish because the US is a country where racial formations are more grounded and acknowledged. Comparing their respective nations with the US, participants debated how in most European countries the existence of race as an organizing principle is denied. The participants discussed how these contexts originate from a deep-rooted colonial amnesia evidenced by ignorance about Europe's colonial past. Too often, white Europeans insist on colorblindness, to the effect that the systematic patterns of racism that condition black people's lives are structurally denied. Participants also considered difficulties with translating racial concepts such as blackness from American vocabulary to Italian, French, Dutch and Swedish because in those linguistic contexts, blackness has more complex connotations. These analyses provided multi-scale approaches and analytical nuances to how national contexts condition the emergence of Black Studies. Several calls were made to follow the lead of the United States and build Black European Studies scholarship on interdisciplinary approaches, such as *Africana* Black Intellectual traditions, Sociology, Political Sciences, Political Economy Critical Race/Cultural Studies, and Gender Studies. Participants likewise called for more transnational dialogues among European scholars and with scholars across the Atlantic. Ultimately, the participants identified positive evolutions suggesting that Black Studies in Europe is inevitable. This is due to the rise of black activism, mostly at the initiative of young educated black people. Not only are they breaking patterns of misrecognition, denial of colonial histories and legacies, or structural discrimination, they are also introducing new paradigms and epistemologies about black populations to establish Black Studies in Europe.

Concluding address: "The Actual Transnationalisation of Black studies and African diaspora studies" by Jean Muteba Rahier (Florida International University, USA)

- 25 In his concluding address, Jean Muteba Rahier proposed two analytical approaches to conceptualize and theorize African diasporas and makes suggestions how to consolidate Black Studies traditions in Europe more productively. The first approach one can take is the diachronic perspective, which is centered on monocultural trajectories and histories of black community formation in exclusive national contexts, e.g. the Middle Passage epistemology in the US. The second is a synchronic approach which conceptualizes black communities through multiple histories and temporalities and is transnational in orientation as well as transcultural and interethnic at the core. Rahier argued that both diachronic and synchronic theorizations are essential for the establishment of Black Studies scholarship in Europe, although a synchronic emphasis is far more comprehensive. This is because it incorporates the complex conditions and specificities of various black communities who, regardless of their differences (their specific geographic contexts, their different experiences, subjectivities, or relations to countries of settlement), are unified in their political activism against anti-black racism. Finally, Rahier concluded by saying that support from regional institutions such as the EU is indispensable for Black Studies to flourish and Black studies scholarship(s) to effect structural solutions for more racially inclusive European societies.
-

INDEX

Subjects: Actualité de la recherche

AUTHOR

OLIVIA FIFI GIESKES

Catholic University of Leuven